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Report of the Secretary-General on the United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon

(For the period from 22 July 2005 to 20 January 2006)

I. Introduction

1. The present report is submitted pursuant to Security Council resolution 1614 (2005) of 29 July 2005, by which the Council extended the mandate of the United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL) for a further period of six months, until 31 January 2006. It covers developments since the previous report, dated 21 July 2005 (S/2005/460).

II. Situation in the area of operation

2. During the reporting period a tense and fragile quiet generally prevailed in the UNIFIL area of operation, interrupted by a few serious clashes across the Blue Line. In the most serious incident, a heavy exchange of fire between Hizbollah and the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) across the Blue Line took place on 21 November, surpassing any activity level since Israel's withdrawal from Lebanon in May 2000. On 27 December, unidentified armed elements fired four Katyusha rockets from the general area of Addaisseh village towards Israel. There was an additional incident of exchange of fire between IDF and Hizbollah later in November. On two occasions, unidentified armed elements fired rockets from Lebanese territory across the Blue Line towards Israel. Recurrent Israeli air violations were a continuous source of tension. There were almost daily violations of the line of withdrawal by Lebanese shepherds and frequent incidents of stone throwing from the Lebanese side.

3. In a serious breach of the ceasefire, Hizbollah launched an attack across the Blue Line on 21 November. The exchange began with heavy Hizbollah mortar and rocket fire from a number of locations against several IDF positions close to the Blue Line in the eastern sector of the UNIFIL area of operation. Simultaneously, a large group of Hizbollah fighters infiltrated Ghajar village and launched an assault on the Mayor's office and the IDF position inside the village, south of the Blue Line, which was vacant at the time. This was followed by an attempt to attack the main IDF position on the eastern outskirts of the village. Four Hizbollah fighters were killed during the exchange of small arms fire with IDF. There was significant damage to civilian property in the village and one civilian resident was wounded.

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4. The ensuing Israeli retaliation was heavy and included aerial bombing. The exchange of fire subsequently spread all along the Blue Line and lasted for over nine hours. Around 800 artillery, tank and mortar rounds and rockets were exchanged. The Israeli Air Force (IAF) dropped at least 30 aerial bombs. One Hizbollah mortar round directly hit a house in the village of Metulla, causing material damage but no casualties. On the Lebanese side, the bridge two kilometres north of Ghajar was destroyed by an Israeli air strike. There were five instances of firing by IDF close to United Nations positions in the area. Twelve Israeli soldiers and one civilian, and an unidentified number of Hizbollah fighters were wounded. A number of Hizbollah positions close to the Blue Line were destroyed or heavily damaged and there was significant damage to some IDF positions and equipment.

5. UNIFIL and my senior representatives in the region were in close contact with the parties throughout the hostilities, urging them to exercise maximum restraint. Their intervention contributed to avoiding further deterioration of the situation and prevented the incident from escalating out of control. UNIFIL eventually succeeded in brokering a ceasefire. Subsequently, on 25 November, in collaboration with the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), UNIFIL facilitated the handover from IDF to Lebanese authorities of the bodies of three Hizbollah fighters killed during the exchange of fire in Ghajar. The body of the fourth Hizbollah fighter was brought back into Lebanese territory by Hizbollah. Owing to the continuing volatile situation in the area, UNIFIL maintains a static patrol presence along the northern side of Ghajar village.

6. In another escalation of violence, on 27 December, unidentified armed elements fired four Katyusha rockets from near the Lebanese village of Addaisseh towards Israel. Three rockets landed in the northern Israeli town of Kiryat Shemona, causing serious damage to two houses but no casualties. IAF retaliated with an air strike against a compound of the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine-General Command in Naameh, 10 kilometres south of Beirut. The Government of Lebanon informed the Secretary-General that it launched an investigation into the incident and would hold the perpetrators responsible so as to prevent recurrence of such acts in the future. On 7 January, Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, Al-Qaida's leader in Iraq, claimed Al-Qaida responsibility for the attack. The claim could not be verified.

7. Tension was also high on 25 August, when two rockets were fired from Lebanese territory in the general area of Majdal Silm. One impacted across the Blue Line, close to a residential area of Kibbutz Margaliot, while the other landed close to the Lebanese village of Mays al-Jabal. There were no casualties. Hizbollah denied any involvement in the incident and there was a claim of responsibility from Palestinian Islamic Jihad.

8. On 23 November, an Israeli civilian paraglider was blown across the Blue Line and landed in Lebanese territory in the vicinity of United Nations position 8-32A, provoking an exchange of small arms fire between Hizbollah and IDF. There were no injuries and the paraglider managed to cross back into Israel, where he was arrested by the authorities.

9. On 30 December, Lebanese locals discovered two 122-mm rockets in a banana plantation close to Naqoura fishing harbour, approximately 1.5 kilometres north of UNIFIL headquarters. The rockets, with a 12-kilometre range, were mounted on a wooden ramp, wired, connected to timers and ready for firing. Lebanese armed forces disarmed and removed the rockets.

10. The Israeli Air Force violated Lebanese airspace on many occasions during the reporting period, disturbing the relative calm along the Blue Line. During the time of heightened tension in November, overflights by jets, helicopters and unmanned aerial vehicles or drones were numerous and particularly intrusive and provocative. Following the Hizbollah attack on 21 November, Israeli aircraft dropped leaflets over some areas of Lebanon, including Beirut. Israeli officials maintained the position that overflights would be carried out whenever Israel deemed them necessary. Since mid-December, the number of Israeli air violations has decreased. As in the past, Israeli aircraft often penetrated deep into Lebanese airspace, sometimes generating sonic booms over populated areas. The pattern identified in my previous reports continued, whereby the aircraft would sometimes fly out to sea and enter Lebanese airspace north of the UNIFIL area of operation, thus avoiding direct observation and verification by UNIFIL.

11. There were no instances of Hizbollah anti-aircraft fire across the Blue Line during the period under review.

12. My senior representatives in the region and I, in addition to a number of concerned Member States, called on numerous occasions on the Government of Lebanon to extend control over all its territory. I urged the Governments of Israel and Lebanon to fully respect the Blue Line in its entirety and to avoid any actions that could lead to an escalation.

13. On 8 September, the Israeli authorities handed over the body of a Hizbollah fighter, who had been killed in the Shab'a farms area on 29 June. The arrangements for that transfer were made through the ICRC; UNIFIL facilitated the handover through the Rosh Haniqra crossing.

14. A Lebanese fisherman went missing on 22 October. His vacant boat was sighted in Lebanese waters before it drifted into Israeli territorial waters and ran aground near Nahariyya. UNIFIL helicopters assisted in an intensive search operation but his body was not recovered. IDF returned the boat through the services of UNIFIL on 24 October. There were a number of bullet marks on the boat. IDF explained that they had opened fire as a precaution in case the boat was booby-trapped, but that it was already empty at the time.

15. In a few instances, IDF fired small- and medium-arms and illumination rounds across the Blue Line, particularly in the Shab'a farms and Yarun areas. UNIFIL called upon the Israeli authorities to halt such actions as firing across the Line has escalatory potential.

16. UNIFIL recorded a number of Lebanese ground violations of the Blue Line, primarily by shepherds, in the Shab'a farms and Ghajar areas. Such violations have become an almost daily routine, often involving the same local shepherds. UNIFIL has urged the Lebanese authorities to prevent all ground violations, in particular the frequent crossings of the Blue Line by shepherds in the Shab'a farms area. The risk that these violations could lead to more serious incidents was demonstrated on 16 September, when IDF apprehended two Lebanese shepherds who had crossed the Blue Line in the Shab'a farms area. IDF released the shepherds to UNIFIL the following day.

17. Demonstrations on the Lebanese side of the Blue Line occurred periodically at the points of friction identified in my previous reports, namely Sheikh Abbad Hill, east of Hula, and Fatima gate, west of Metulla. The demonstrators occasionally

threw stones and other objects at IDF positions and, at times, tampered with the technical fence.

18. The authority and control of the Government of Lebanon remained limited in the south, in general, and in the areas of the Blue Line, in particular. The Gendarmerie units and the Joint Security Force, comprised of army and internal security forces, continued to conduct mobile patrols and maintain several checkpoints in the UNIFIL area of operation. The Lebanese Army operates in some of the areas vacated by Israel in May 2000, but at a distance from the Blue Line. At the request of UNIFIL, the Joint Security Force intervened on a few occasions to control demonstrations and avert possible incidents along the Blue Line except in the Ghajar area. Despite numerous calls by the Security Council, the Government of Lebanon continues to maintain its position that, without a comprehensive peace with Israel, Lebanese armed forces would not act as a border guard for Israel and would not be deployed along the Blue Line.

19. In a positive development, the liaison between UNIFIL and the Lebanese Army was strengthened during the period under review. On 23 December, the Army Liaison Office completed its move from Qana to Naqoura and is now co-located with UNIFIL headquarters. On 13 January, one liaison officer was appointed in each of the two UNIFIL field battalions on a permanent basis and on 16 January, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs notified UNIFIL of the appointment of General Abdel-Rahman Chehaytly to the position of Government Coordinator with UNIFIL, a post which had been vacant since October 2005.

20. The Force Commander, Major General Alain Pellegrini, and my Personal Representative for Lebanon, Geir Pedersen, have held successive discussions with the highest Lebanese political and military officials, including the President, Prime Minister, Speaker of the Parliament, the ministers for foreign affairs, defence and interior, and the head of the army, on the extension of the Government's authority to the south and, in particular on ways to bring about the deployment of the armed forces in the south. Top officials have reacted cautiously, expressing concern about possible negative implications on national security and stability. In a letter dated 9 January 2006 to the Foreign Minister, Major General Pellegrini proposed a better coordination mechanism between UNIFIL and the Lebanese armed forces and the establishment of a joint planning cell, composed of members of the Lebanese armed forces and UNIFIL, to draw up a detailed plan for the extension of Lebanese authority in the UNIFIL area of operation, including the deployment of the Lebanese Army to the south of Lebanon. In his response of 16 January, the Foreign Minister informed the Force Commander that the Lebanese authorities have positively taken note of the proposal and would revert in substance following further study and consultations.

21. Control of the Blue Line and its vicinity seems to remain for the most part with Hizbollah. Under such circumstances, Hizbollah has maintained and reinforced a visible presence in the area, with permanent observation posts, temporary checkpoints and patrols. It carried out construction work to fortify and expand some of its fixed positions, demined the adjacent areas, built new access roads and established new positions close to the Blue Line. Some Hizbollah positions are in close proximity to United Nations positions, posing additional security risks to United Nations personnel and equipment. This situation has not yet been rectified despite repeated objections conveyed by UNIFIL to the Lebanese authorities.

22. UNIFIL encountered an increase of temporary denials of access by Hizbollah. In general, the Force was able to regain and assert its freedom of movement within a very short period of time.

23. UNIFIL continued to assist the civilian population with medical and dental care, water projects, equipment or services for schools and orphanages, and supplied social services to the needy. Veterinary assistance was also provided. The resources for UNIFIL assistance were primarily made available by troop-contributing countries. UNIFIL cooperated closely on humanitarian matters with the Lebanese authorities, United Nations agencies, ICRC, embassies and other organizations and agencies operating in Lebanon.

24. The presence of a large number of minefields in the UNIFIL area of operation, in particular along the Blue Line, remained a cause of serious concern. Since July 2005, two civilians have been killed and six injured by explosions of mines or ordnance. UNIFIL continued its operational demining activities, clearing over 400 mines and rounds of unexploded ordnance in an area measuring some 12,000 square metres; surveyed the roads; and continued marking and fencing known minefields. A substantial amount of information on the presence of minefields in the area has been received from IDF in the past. Nevertheless, information about some areas close to the Blue Line is still lacking.

25. The number of mine incidents and civilian casualties are tragically increasing as the local demand for land continues to grow. In response, the United Nations Mine Action Coordination Centre sought permission from the Government of Lebanon to commence clearance operations in the most affected locations along the Blue Line. Permission was granted in October 2005 and one mine clearance team, managed by the United Nations Mine Action Coordination Centre, was assigned permanently to work in those minefields; permission to work in additional areas is being sought. This is an encouraging development, as these minefields continue to prevent the use of large areas of prime agricultural or grazing land having a direct impact on the life of the communities living adjacent to them.

III. Organizationai matters

26. UNIFIL continued its efforts to maintain the ceasefire along the Blue Line through mobile ground and air patrols, observation from fixed positions and close contact with the parties, the latter with a view to correcting violations, resolving incidents and preventing escalation. Its operations were concentrated along the Blue Line, though the Force maintained a few rear positions. The United Nations Truce Supervision Organization (UNTSO), through the Observer Group Lebanon, supported UNIFIL in the fulfilment of its mandate.

27. As at 31 December 2005, UNIFIL comprised 1,989 troops, from France (203), Ghana (648), India (671), Ireland (6), Italy (53), Poland (212) and Ukraine (196). UNIFIL was assisted in its tasks by 51 UNTSO military observers. A map showing the current deployment of UNIFIL is attached. With effect from 26 October, a medical unit from India replaced the Polish medical company manning the UNIFIL hospital. In addition, UNIFIL employed 390 civilian staff, of whom 100 were recruited internationally and 290 locally. Major General Pellegrini continued as Force Commander. Mr. Pedersen continued to act as my Personal Representative for Lebanon.

28. Since the establishment of UNIFIL, 246 members of the Force have lost their lives, 79 as a result of firings or bomb explosions, 105 as a result of accidents and 62 from other causes. A total of 345 members of the Force have been wounded by firing or mine explosions.

IV. Financial matters

29. By its resolution 59/307 of 22 June 2005, the General Assembly appropriated to the Special Account for UNIFIL the amount of $94.3 million gross, equivalent to $7.9 million per month, for the maintenance of the Force for the period from 1 July 2005 to 30 June 2006. Should the Security Council decide to extend the mandate of the Force beyond 31 January 2006, as recommended in paragraph 40 below, the cost of maintaining the Force will be limited to the amounts approved by the Assembly.

30. As at 30 November 2005, unpaid assessed contributions to the Special Account for UNIFIL amounted to $72.6 million. Total outstanding assessed contributions for all peacekeeping operations at the same date amounted to $1,988.3 million.

31. As at 31 December 2005, amounts owed to troop contributors totalled $4.6 million. Reimbursement of troop and contingent-owned equipment costs have been made for the period up to 31 October 2005 and 30 September 2005, respectively, in accordance with the quarterly payment schedule.

V. Observations

32. A fragile political and security environment continued to prevail in Lebanon. In the south, the general situation remained for the most part calm, though volatile. The greatest cause for concern was the Hizbollah attack across the Blue Line on 21 November, which was a deliberate act in direct breach of the decisions of the Security Council and led to a heavy exchange of fire between Hizbollah and IDF. The exchange of fire inside the village of Ghajar was the first time since the Israeli withdrawal in 2000 that a confrontation had taken place within a populated area, which posed grave dangers for the civilian population of the village. I appeal to the parties to exercise utmost restraint so as not to endanger civilian lives on either side of the Blue Line and remind them that one violation cannot justify another. I remain concerned about the precarious situation in the village, where another clash could evolve into a major confrontation. The incident highlighted the need for stronger security control around the village. UNIFIL has established a static patrol presence on the northern side of Ghajar and is ready to assist the Government of Lebanon with its responsibilities in this respect.

33. The rocket firing incidents in August and December, perpetrated by unidentified armed elements, carried significant potential for a military escalation. It should be noted that IDF acted with restraint in August, when it did not respond militarily to the attack. The Lebanese authorities have formally pronounced themselves to be against such attacks emanating from their territory, and I am encouraged by their determination and commitment, as expressed in a letter to me dated 28 November 2005, to hold the perpetrators of such attacks responsible so as to avoid recurrence of such attacks in the future.

34. Persistent Israeli air incursions, occasionally reaching far into Lebanese airspace, violating its sovereignty and territorial integrity, remain a matter of deep concern. The air incursions elevate tension and disrupt the fragile calm along the Blue Line. Their cessation, consistently called for by the United Nations and a number of concerned Member States, would contribute to maintaining calm along the Blue Line.

35. The serious breaches of the ceasefire underlined yet again the urgent need for the Government of Lebanon to act and extend its full authority throughout the south down to the Blue Line and to deploy sufficient numbers of armed and security forces to maintain law and order and ensure a calm environment. It is essential that the Government assert effective control over the use of force throughout its entire territory and prevent attacks from Lebanon across the Blue Line. My Personal Representative will continue to discuss these matters with the Government and provide the support of the United Nations in achieving this objective. UNIFIL stands ready to assist the Lebanese authorities in this endeavour, as necessary.

36. I welcome the decision of the Government of Lebanon to co-locate the Army Liaison Office with UNIFIL headquarters in Naqoura, to appoint liaison officers with the UNIFIL field battalions and to work closer with the Force in the field. I am also pleased to note the appointment of the new Government Coordinator with UNIFIL. However, more needs to be done. Planning for the deployment of additional forces in the south should start without delay. In that regard, I encourage the Government of Lebanon to take up the Force Commander's proposal to establish a joint planning cell, composed of members of the Lebanese armed forces and UNIFIL. The activities and presence of the Joint Security Force could also be enhanced on the ground, even within the limits of its authorized number of 1,000. Additionally, closer coordination between UNIFIL and the Joint Security Force patrols in the area of operation would contribute to enhancing the role and activities of the Lebanese armed forces in the area. The implications of an increased presence of the Lebanese armed forces in the south for UNIFIL structure and force strength will be assessed on a regular basis.

37. The situation along the Blue Line continues to be susceptible to volatile regional developments. The United Nations Special Coordinator for the Middle East Peace Process, my Personal Representative for Lebanon and the UNIFIL Force Commander act in unison to defuse crises as they arise. The situation in the Middle East continues to be very tense and is likely to remain so, unless and until a comprehensive settlement covering all aspects of the Middle East problem can be reached. This underscores the need for determined efforts by all concerned to tackle the problem in all its aspects, with a view to arriving at a just and durable peace settlement, based on all relevant resolutions of the Security Council, including resolutions 242 (1967), 338 (1973) and 1397 (2002). My senior representatives in the region will continue to contribute to these efforts by lending political and diplomatic support to the parties in order to defuse sources of friction and by working towards the establishment of lasting peace and security in southern Lebanon.

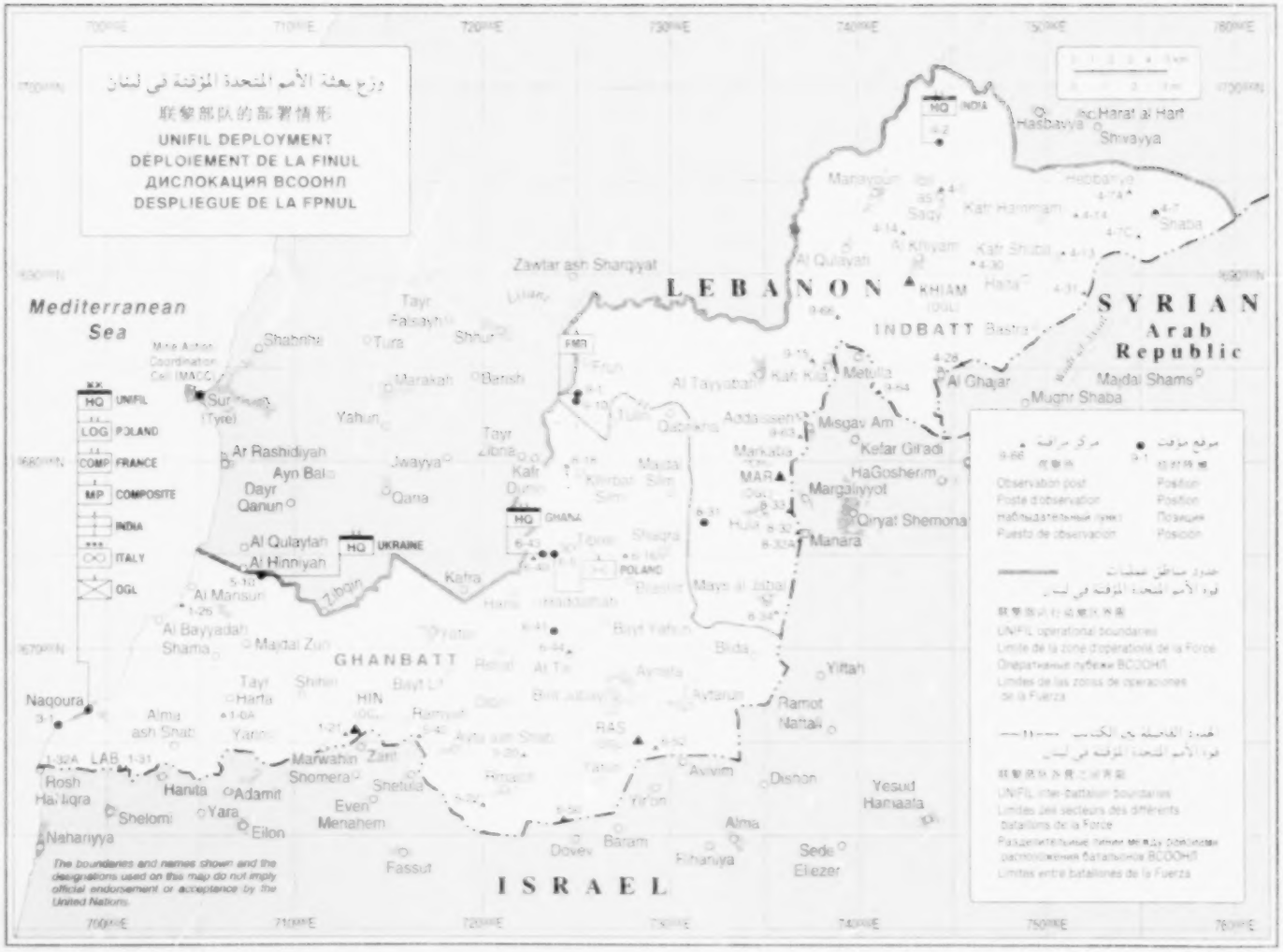
38. UNIFIL, for its part, will focus on the remaining part of its mandate, the restoration of international peace and security, by observing, monitoring and reporting on developments in its area of operation and liaising with the parties to maintain calm.

39. Economic development of the south is inextricably linked with peace and security. However, economic aid has been slow in coming. I call upon the Government, international donors, United Nations agencies and non-governmental organizations to increase their efforts to work towards the economic rehabilitation and development of southern Lebanon.

40. In his letter dated 9 January 2006 (S/2006/15) addressed to me, the Chargé d'affaires a.i. of the Permanent Mission of Lebanon to the United Nations conveyed his Government's request that the Security Council extend the mandate of UNIFIL for a further period of six months. In the light of the prevailing conditions in the area, I support the extension and recommend that the Security Council extend the mandate of UNIFIL until 31 July 2006.

41. In making this recommendation, I must again draw attention to the serious shortfall in the funding of UNIFIL. At present, unpaid assessments amount to $72.6 million. This represents money owed to the Member States contributing the troops that make up the Force. I appeal to all Member States to pay their assessments promptly and in full, and to clear all remaining arrears. I should like to express my gratitude to the Governments contributing troops to the Force for their understanding and patience in these difficult circumstances.

42. In conclusion, I wish to express my appreciation to the Special Coordinator, Alvaro de Soto, and my Personal Representative, Mr. Pedersen, and to pay tribute to the Force Commander, Major General Pellegrini, and the men and women of UNIFIL for the manner in which they have carried out their difficult and often dangerous task. Their discipline and bearing have been of a high order, reflecting credit on themselves, their countries and on the United Nations.



Map No. 4144 Rev. 11 UNITED NATIONS
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Department of Peacekeeping Operations
Cartographic Section